

# **The Capital Times**

## **CRAIG THOMPSON: WISCONSIN MUST INVEST MORE IN TRANSPORTATION**

OPINION

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Craig Thompson

If you had to guess which Midwest state is the least expensive to drive in when it comes to taxes and fees, which would it be?

It's not the Wolverine state or the Hoosier state, nor is it the states that the Hawkeyes, Golden Gophers or Fighting Illini call home.

It's the Badger state.

That's right; you pay less in taxes and fees to drive in Wisconsin than any of our neighboring states. You are probably astounded by this answer because you have repeatedly been told that our gas tax is among the highest in the country.

The rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say, is that in Wisconsin there has been a conscious decision over the years to rely more heavily on the gas tax than other fees because out-of-state travelers and tourists share in that cost. As a result, Wisconsin has the lowest vehicle registration fees among our neighbors and no sales tax on gasoline.

When you add the various transportation fees and taxes based on an average driver in an average vehicle (\$20,000 vehicle driven 15,000 miles a year), Wisconsin drivers pay just more than \$270 a year. A driver in Indiana pays just more than \$490. Costs in other neighboring states are somewhere in between.

Perhaps it's time we have a legitimate conversation about the gas tax as a primary funding source for transportation infrastructure and whether we need to diversify our transportation funding like all of our neighbors and most other states.

If we are to have a productive dialogue, however, we must start from the premise that roads, bridges, harbors, airports and buses have value in our society and cost money. We must acknowledge that an effective transportation system is essential for attracting new businesses and allowing our current businesses to remain competitive.

The dollars we currently receive from the state gas tax and registration fees comprise almost all of the state investment in our transportation network. It would be absolute folly to stubbornly fight to save \$5 to \$10 over the next year so we can make one extra trip to McDonald's while our infrastructure crumbles and our economy stagnates.

Wisconsin needs to invest more in transportation. Transit needs are going unmet, and delays in vital road projects continue to mount. Whatever funding mechanism our governor and Legislature ultimately agree on, it needs to be sufficient to move these projects forward, or Wisconsin's competitiveness in the Midwest and the world will look more like the Northwestern Wildcats than the Wisconsin Badgers.

*Craig Thompson is executive director of the Transportation Development Association, a statewide alliance representing more than 400 transportation stakeholders. For more information, go to [www.tdawisconsin.org](http://www.tdawisconsin.org).*